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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 FREETOWN 000232

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, INR

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SUBJECT: School Violence: A Dangerous New Trend

REF: 05 Freetown 167

Summary

¶1. A spate of violent demonstrations by high school students may be the start of a dangerous trend. There have been five separate student demonstrations in less than a month, one of which resulted in the shooting death of a student. Government officials have expressed concern over the violence, but the social conditions that are contributing to the trend will be difficult to address. End summary.

Students On The Rampage

¶2. On February 9, students from Yoni Bana Secondary School at Mile 91 in central Sierra Leone rioted when police arrested their senior student prefect for allegedly beating a fellow student who lived in the school principal's residence. When the magistrate judge refused to grant bail, an irate group of students took their principal hostage and forcibly marched him three miles to the police station, which is also used as the magistrate court. The students insisted that their prefect be released from custody, but the police refused. An advance security vehicle in a vice presidential convoy that happened on the scene stopped and attempted to restore order by firing warning shots. One of the demonstrating students was killed, allegedly by one of the warning shots. This infuriated the students, who stormed the police station, overpowered the officers, and forcibly released their colleague. The students then burned the police station, two police motorbikes and a police vehicle. Mile 91 police requested reinforcement from a nearby town to quell the situation and later arrested 15 students.

¶3. On February 13, students from St. Joseph's Secondary School, an all-girls' Catholic school in Freetown, violently demonstrated after learning the Ministry of Education sacked one of their school principals. (Note: Most high schools have two principals - one for the junior high school and another for the senior high school. End Note.) The students, who blamed the senior high school principal for orchestrating the sacking, demanded that the Ministry fire her instead. The students threatened to close the school and threw rocks

and other objects at the school building.

¶4. On March 2, students from Albert Academy School in Freetown went on the rampage, throwing stones and other objects at the school building and injuring a teacher. The angry students claimed that most teachers do not show up for class. Police made no arrests but restored calm the following day. Most parents are still apprehensive, however, and have been reluctant to send their children back to school.

¶5. On March 7, students from Collegiate Secondary School in Freetown went on strike, complaining about the lack of pipe-borne water, deplorable sanitary conditions, classroom overcrowding and the lethargic attitude of teachers. Pandemonium ensued in the vicinity of the school and six students were arrested for misconduct and breach of public order.

¶6. On March 9, students from high schools all over Freetown rioted after an annual inter-secondary school athletic meet organized by the Ministry of Education. Students threw rocks and other objects at each other, jumped on vehicles, hit and robbed passers-by and sang lewd songs. Fifty-four students were arrested and charged to court for riotous conduct, unlawful possession of marijuana and other offenses. (Note: Violence at this particular event has become an annual ritual, but seems to be getting worse. End note.)

Government Reacts With Concern

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¶7. Police Inspector General Brima Acha Kamara said in a press conference that the police will take "tough action" against school indiscipline and that any student caught behaving in a disorderly manner will be arrested, investigated, and then prosecuted. Assistant Inspector General for Police Operations Richard Moigbe was more conciliatory and said that he has ordered local commanders to engage students and teachers of all secondary schools in their area of operation to identify the growing problems in the schools and find permanent solutions to them. Moigbe also said that though the students may have genuine complaints about what is affecting them negatively, parents and guardians must caution them to desist from violence.

¶8. Education Minister Alpha Wurie expressed concern over the violence in a radio interview. He attributed this development to several factors, including the civil war, as some students have been either victims or perpetrators of heinous war crimes. Wurie also blamed the upsurge of student violence on the lack of guidance counselors to help students who are traumatized and prone to violence. Wurie urged parents to teach their children good discipline for the good of the nation.

Proud History Of Student Demonstration Sours

¶9. Student demonstrations are not a new phenomenon in Sierra Leone, and college students have historically been a force for positive change. In 1977, university students demonstrated repeatedly against the one-party government of President Stevens and eventually forced him to conduct early elections. In 1996, students successfully demonstrated against President Kabbah for attempting to give ex-President Momoh a yearly stipend, a bodyguard, a gardener and other benefits. In August 1997, two students were killed during a demonstration against the Armed Forces Revolutionary council (AFRC)

junta, which had seized power from President Kabbah.

¶10. Recent student demonstrations, however, differ in their tendency to quickly descend into violence. The new trend began last year when Fourah Bay College students demonstrated to protest poor terms of service for university employees (reftel). The protests started as a peaceful march but later became violent. This year's violence has come from younger students who have even less ability to peacefully channel their dissatisfaction with authority.

Comment

¶11. Much of the blame for students' violent conduct can be traced back to the ravages of Sierra Leone's 11-year war. Most secondary school students would have been between eight and ten years old during the peak of the war. Many of them and their families suffered serious human rights violations and others were combatants themselves. These children remain extremely vulnerable. Violations aside, the war interrupted the schooling of children nationwide. Traditional values, social fabric, and social norms were all casualties of war. Anger and frustration now often manifests itself as violence throughout society, and children have picked up on this and mimic it.

¶12. Also, now that the war is over, the Ministry of Education is viewed as one of the most corrupt ministries. (Note: The Anti Corruption Commission has identified the Ministry of Education as one of its "hotspots" of corruption. End Note.) This means that youth are exposed daily to authority figures who abuse their authority and they see how it negatively affects their daily lives and their education. Underpaid, and often unpaid teachers notoriously neglect their classes and supplement their incomes with after-hours tutorials for those who can afford to pay. School conditions are frequently abysmal, adding to students' legitimate grievances.

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¶13. The political and economic prospects for youth do not offer much to look forward to. Although most policy makers and donors see the youth as the force that will make or break Sierra Leone's current peace, there is little opportunity for youth to find jobs that will contribute positively to society and there is no comprehensive youth employment program. The younger generation is not well represented in the ruling party, either - the old guard maintains control of the affairs of the state. Youth have no real positive outlet through regularized sports or other activities. For example, secondary school students practice all year for only one day of inter-school competition, the Secondary School Sports Day. Anger among youth is also coming out as angry street slang. One example is "Ya na bar we go pwell ya" meaning "You are treating the country like a beer bar, so we will brawl in it and destroy it." This slang is not only targeted at government officials, but anyone on the street who appears successful or rich.

¶14. These incidents, though isolated, may be an indication that worse outbreaks are to come. If the present political, social, and economic conditions remained unchanged, anger and frustration will undoubtedly continue to increase. Fixing the country's broken institutions and giving the younger generation hope that their situation will improve is the only way forward. Government officials are, for the most part, saying the right things. The country's future depends on them putting their money where their mouth is. End

Comment.
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